DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 219 830 CS 503 924

AUTHOR Littlejohn, Stephen W.
TITLE Images of Communication: World Views and Future Visions.
PUB DATE Jul 82
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Meeting of the World Future Society Conference (Washington, DC, July 18-22, 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication (Thought Transfer); Epistemology; *Futures (of Society); Interpersonal Communication; *Philosophy

ABSTRACT

Communication theories are always based upon assumptions about human nature and knowledge. Ways of thinking about these two dimensions can each be divided into two opposing groups. Actional thinking emphasizes freedom of choice, while nonactional thinking attributes little or no freedom to individuals. Elementalist thought sees the world in terms of empirically observable preorganized phenomena, while projectionist thought sees knowledge as a product of the observer. Combining these ways of thinking produces four world views: (1) "intuitive" thinking, combining nonactional and projectionist thought, is popular in the general population; (2) "reactive" thinking, combining nonactional and elementalist thinking, treats human beings as objects of study; (3) "adaptive" thinking, combining elementalism with actional assumptions, is especially strong in the scientific and technological community; and (4) "creative" thinking, combining projectionist and actional assumptions, is prevalent in the arts. All four world views have roles to play in future communication theory: intuitive thinking as a result of its deep cultural roots; reactive thinking in behavior modification, theories of mass society, and sociobiology; adaptive thinking in communication technology and in investigations of communication competence; and creative thinking in its ability to give perspective to the insights of the other views. (JL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED219830

IMAGES OF COMMUNICATION: WORLD VIEWS AND FUTURE VISIONS

Stephen W. Littlejohn
Professor, Speech Communication
Humboldt State University
Arcata, California 95521

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Stephen W. Littlejohn
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

World Future Society
Washington, D.C.
July, 1982

Communication is a human activity. Unlike processes in nature, communication in the future will be a product of our own making. In other words, communication will be as we conceive it to be. It is therefore important at this conference to consider not only visions of the future, but ways of thinking about the future. This is precisely the purpose of our panel and my presentation.

Actually, in considering communication, we are really thinking about ourselves. We humans create and consume messages, we have meanings, we understand, we affect others and are affected personally by interaction, and we create the media and technology used in communication. In all ways, communication is for and by people. So when I refer to ways of thinking about communication, I am speaking of ways of thinking about people--about the self, others, and the social and cultural mileau in which we live.

Philosophy, of course, is the field devoted to questions regarding ways of thinking. Some of the most important themes of philosophy are ethics, values, being, and knowledge. Ethics deals with problems of what is right, values with what is important, being with what is real, and knowledge with what is known. I would like to narrow our consideration to the last two areas. I do so because of the special relevance of the nature of reality and knowledge to our focus--communication theory. All theories, including theories of communication, are based first and foremost on assumptions related to the nature of existence and ways of knowing about that existence.

Before proceeding, I would like to reflect a bit on communication theory. The term theory is rather abstract. In different fields theory means different things. For example, in most of the sciences, the term refers to a definite kind of explanation of the phenomena under consideration. In philosophy, on the other hand, the concept is applied to just about any unified set of ideas. Since communication is a multi-disciplinary field, communication theories come in many varieties. Therefore for my purposes here, I shall define theory very loosely as any systematic explanation or representation of the communication process or aspects of that process. Scholars often refer to the body

CS503924

of knowledge about communication simply as communication theory, in the singular.

As I stated above, communication theories are always based on assumptions about the nature of human life, or what it means to be a person. They also depend upon assumptions regarding how we come to know about human nature. So, in communication theory at least, there are two basic dimensions of thought--human nature and knowledge. There are certainly other dimensions of thought, but these are the areas I consider most important in the development of communication theory.

Ways of Thinking

I would now like to discuss these two dimensions of thought in greater detail. It is obviously impossible to deal with all, or even most, of the ways of thinking in one brief presentation. I shall therefore narrow my focus to those assumptions most fundamental to communication theory. Let us consider first ways of thinking about human nature.

Ways of Thinking About Human Nature

Although there are surely many conceptions of human nature, I do not believe it is an inappropriate simplification to suggest that most of these have something to do with freedom. In other words, some positions claim that humans have freechoice and others do not. In truth, these ways of thinking about human nature lie on a spectrum between the extremes of great freedom or self determination to none. However, for purposes of discussion I divide these into two broad opposing groups called actional and non-actional approaches.

Actional thinking assumes that individuals are by and large able to make genuine choices, to decide for themselves how to behave or to conduct their lives. True, actional thinking usually recognizes that there are limits to individual choice, that much of the time our behavior is programmed and at least partially predictable, but fundamentally people can decide to change a behavior pattern or to go about an activity somewhat differently than would be predicted from past behavior. Hence in this mode of thinking, individuals seek goals, have purposes, and display motives. In other words, people act. You can see how acting is different from simply moving or behaving. Most actional thinkers recognize that in order to act, people must make interpretations of the situations in which they find themselves. In short, actional thinking envisions humans who perceive, interpret, plan, and act.

In opposition to this kind of thinking about human nature is the non-actional position. This way of thinking about human nature attributes little or no freedom to individuals. Instead, people are believed to be highly programmed in the sense that their behavior is determined by genetic, environmental, cultural, and perhaps mystical factors. Although the person may have

an illusion of choice, real choice does not exist. So, although people reflect on their experience, no real independent action is possible. In short, such thinking envisions human nature as highly predictable. Vernon Cronen, another member of this panel, is presenting a more thorough discussion of these kinds of thinking; you may wish to refer to his paper at this point. Now let's turn to the second dimension, ways of thinking about knowledge.

Ways of Thinking about Knowledge

Again I will simplify a range of positions on knowledge by collapsing them into two broad opposing groups. These I call elementalist and projectionist thought. The primary difference between these ways of thinking is the degree to which they separate the knowing person from the knowable world. At one extreme, elementalist thought teaches that people are potentially objective observers of an immutable world. At the other extreme, projectionism believes that the person and world are not separate, but that one's knowledge is largely a construction or projection of the individual's subjective response.

Elementalist thought is the way of classical science. It sees the world as a pre-organized universe of phenomena that can best be understood inductively by observing each element and putting these together into a composite, or, inversely, by tearing down an object into its managable parts. To the elementalist, the world is eminently sensible and easily ascertained by careful, objective observation. Empiricism is the key--experience the world, and you will know it. Given enough time and powerful enough instruments, we can come to know any aspect of the world. This kind of thinking is strictly dualistic--I, the knower, and it, the known.

In contrast, projectionism sees knowledge as a projection of the knower onto the world. Individuals are subjective creatures who perceive through a filter of symbols and meanings. Nothing can be known in the raw; all knowledge is mediated. People develop categories, like templates, with which they measure what is observed. Projectionist thinking recognizes that the flux of events defined as the world can be fruitfully conceptualized in many different ways and that there is no objectively true reality. In this mode, "objective" knowledge is really knowledge by consensus. Structures in the world are not immutable, but in process. If elementalism is embodied in science, projectionism is the way of art.

World Views

Now, if we combine the ways of thinking about human nature and knowledge, we come up with four world views which can help us understand how communication has been conceived in the past, how it is approached in the present,

and options for theorizing about communication in the future. The following table outlines these four world views:

Ways of Thinking About Knowledge	Ways of Thinking About Human Nature: Non-actional	Ways of Thinking About Human Nature: Actional
Projectionist	World View I "Intuitive"	World View IV "Creative"
Elementalist	World View II "Reactive"	World View III "Adaptive"

Before I discuss these world views, I would like to make some important qualifications. First we must keep in mind that these categories are not all-inclusive; they are a simplification of the number of world views actually in existence. They represent large opposing types of thinking without making fine distinctions. Thus, my descriptive generalizations below are very broad and should not be taken as exhaustive. Second, I do not want to leave you with the impression that these four world views are equally prevalent. Some are easier to find in discussions of communication than are others. I suspect that the relative popularity of these world views changes in different intellectual periods in history. I think it would be all to easy to associate the four world views with individual people. Although individuals are probably most comfortable espousing a particular world view much of the time, they usually do not stick with one world view all of the time. Also, do not equate these categories with theories. Within a given world view, a number of contradictory theories are possible. Finally, I wish to warn you not to take my labels too literally. I am using these terms, as we always use language, in particular ways. For example, I do not mean to imply that the "adaptive" view is never "creative," or that "creativity," does not involve "intuition."

World View I: "Intuitive"

This kind of thinking is uncommon in western academic circles, but fairly prevalent in the general population and in other cultures of the world. It

involves a belief in certain universal or preordained ways of seeing the world that remove at least some human freedom. Such thinking often has religious or mystical foundations. Astrology is a good example.

World View I thought attempts to understand present conditions on the basis of certain universal categories of perception. The known and knower are not separate but are governed by transcendent forces. The past is seen as a manifestation of these forces, and observers of the past often note that "history repeats itself" because of these timeless influences.

This form of thinking has had little involvement in communication theory as we know it, although individuals who espouse intuitive knowledge may have strong implicit notions of communication.

World View II: "Reactive"

This world view is the foundation of much twentieth century psychology, although it is not limited to this discipline. Combining non-actional and elementalist ways of thinking, it treats the human being as an object of scientific study. In psychology this world view has relied largely on the stimulus-organism-response model of the person. Behavior is seen as a predictable, knowable entity, determined by various organic and environmental factors.

Since both individual and group behavior today is largely determined by past events, the past assumes importance for understanding present and future conditions. Scholars in this tradition would concentrate on tracing the communication history of a group or individual in order to understand how and why present conditions exist. Media researchers with this world view, for example, trace the history of predominant media, assessing their effect on society. Psychiatrists and psychologists of the Freudian tradition attempt to explain personal communication problems in terms of certain formative experiences.

Many researchers in the communication field--indeed, in the behavioral and social sciences generally--espouse World View II thinking. Especially strong in this tradition is the variable analytic approach. Treating behaviors as a physical entity, such researchers catalogue and correlate variables, attempting to establish causal links that will make prediction possible.

For many years, communication theory was guided by World View II thinking. Its goal was to establish a predictable causal web among communication variables. For example, group communication research resulted in a multitude of cause-effect and correlational propositions dealing with such variables as group size, leadership, interaction, space, group productivity, etc.

World View III: "Adaptive"

Adaptive thinking combines elementalism with actional assumptions. The individual has great latitude in approaching and learning about the outside world. This kind of thinking suggests that people adapt to the known world; indeed, they even use it to their advantage.

The adaptive mode is quite prevalent in western society, especially in the scientific and technological community. It is strongly oriented to discovery of the world for purposes of future applications. In its preoccupation with pragmatism, its goal is most often one of making human life more comfortable and diverse. Adaptive thinkers are not very past oriented except that sometimes they seek to learn from the successes and failures of the past. Progress into the future is the aim of adaptive thinking.

In approaching communication in the adaptive style, one aims to increase individuals' capacity for human interchange. On the personal level, this goal means achieving greater competence in sending and receiving messages. On the public level, it means developing increasingly sophisticated systems and technologies of communication.

This kind of thinking promotes three types of communication theory. One genre of theory arising from this world view is normative theory, or theory that gives us principles for improved communication. Much rhetorical theory is of this type. The second type of theory in this category consists of attempts to discover the rules or strategies employed by communicators in various situations. The implicit goal of this kind of theory is to improve our understanding of the mechanisms we employ in interaction with others so that we can improve human communication. Finally, this kind of thinking promotes technical theories, such as information theory, that permits the development of communication systems and hardware.

World View IV: "Creative"

This world view combines projectionist and actional assumptions. It teaches that individuals have much freedom in perceiving and thereby structuring reality. What we wish to make real is real. This style of thinking is prevalent in the humanities, especially in the arts. In fact, the goal of the humanities as a whole is to probe the richness of the individual's subjective response.

The method of World View IV is often perspectivism, or switching from one perspective to another in viewing the world. This approach is often applied to creative problem-solving. The creative orientation to the past is frequently one of recalling and celebrating great figures and events, and the orientation to the future is sometimes visionary, even utopian.

World View IV has contributed to communication theory in two major ways. One contribution is critical theory, or guidelines for the criticism of communication forms such as speeches, films, broadcast media, and literature. Here the goal is to work toward the finest communication forms possible. The second contribution of World View IV is "grounded" theory, or theory that seeks to describe the world as perceived and understood by people in their natural settings. This kind of work is quite different from the traditional behavioristic research of the "reactive" (World View II) school. It does not begin with a set of categories or measurement devices, but looks directly to the symbols, meanings, interpretations, and acts of individuals in their natural setting.

I shall now conclude this brief presentation by looking at some possible future visions of these world views.

Future Visions

In this section I would like to speculate on some directions that these world views may lead to in the future. Specifically, I am interested in the future of communication theory and how theories may affect or reflect the world of communication in the coming years.

The first world view, intuitive thinking, will probably always be with us, but it will in all likelihood not play a very important role in communication theory. Communication theory is such a product of western linear thought that it leaves not the tiniest crack through which the "folk wisdom" of the first world view might enter.

Still, I believe that intuitive thought will guide the lives and actions of a significant portion of the world's population, so long as western technology does not become so aggressively universal as to snuff it out. I suspect that despite our extreme ethnocentrism in industrial society, this will not happen. Even universities are now making efforts to help preserve the World View I perspective, as it adds another option for the unhitching of conceptual blinders. But this world view will be preserved not in death as a university museum piece, but in life by the nourishment it receives through its deep cultural roots.

I do not mean to suggest that this way of thinking will have no impact on the future of communication. I think there will be increasing attempts to investigate extrasensory communication and phi phenomena. Although such interests have received impetus from the intuitive style in the past, future investigations along this line will probably be greatly affected also by adaptive and creative styles of thinking. In addition, I expect to see increasing efforts to further develop universalist ethics for communication, both on the private and public levels. Such moves will be affected in part by World View I thinking.

World View II thought has been on the wane in recent years. Its non-actional stance led to a great deal of criticism in the 1970s, as the behavioral and social sciences were moving more and more to an actional point of view. I expect this trend to continue. Although the philosophy of B. F. Skinner will not soon return to vogue, elements of his Walden II, tempered by adaptive thinking, will live on.

The one clear future orientation of reactive thinking is behavior shaping, commonly called "behavior mod." Researchers of the World View II vintage seek to understand the influences on behavior to the point of being able to manipulate it. Theories will continue to be developed for this purpose. On the personal level, therapists will attempt to change client behavior by manipulating aspects of the environment. On the public level, media will continue to attempt to affect behavior through appeals and advertising. Yet such uses of communicationtheory in the future will be guided more by adaptive thinking than by the reactive approach of the past.

Another area of communication theory motivated by World View II thinking are the theories of mass society, which suggest that people are lost in a sea of alienation. These theorists, who tend to take a critical stance, begin with the assumption that members of the mass society are easily manipulated by mass media. Since the critics of mass soceity have generally reacted against technology, it is likely that this voice will continue in the future, but it is too soon to predict how loud and influential this voice will be. Mass media research in the next decade holds the key here. Some researchers and policy makers now believe that the media affect us more directly and heavily than previously imagined, but there is still much uncertainty about this finding. If research continues to provide evidence of powerful media effects, the critics of mass society will no doubt rise to prominence. If this situation comes to pass, there will be a new and interesting tension between the adaptive and reactive styles of thought in future communication theory.

Before leaving the implications of World View II for the future, I wish to mention one relatively new area that may have a major impact on communication theory in the future. This area is the biology of behavior, or sociobiology. This new research field rests solidly on World View II assumptions. Unlike the behaviorism of the past, however, it attributes more power to organic, especially genetic, factors, than to environmental forces in determining behavior. I do not know of any efforts to extend sociobiology into communication theory as of yet, but if the biological model continues to rise at its present rate, such an application is inevitable. I can imagine a time in the not-too-distant future when a revolution occurs in our ideas about communication.

I am quite certain that World View III, adaptive thinking, is by far the most prevalent in communication theory today. I expect this view to guide most of the work into the future. Barring a frontal attack by the sociobiologists or the critics of mass society, I suspect that it will remain strong for some time to come. The basis of the popularity of adaptive thinking is that members of industrial society have great confidence in their ability to comprehend the environment and to deal with it in ways that advance civilization. This is a clear space age mentality. It is utterly dualistic. People are seen as preeminent and powerful; nature is basically passive and

conquerable. Here I would like to outline what I consider to be some of the chief ways in which future communication theory will be affected by the World View III philosophy.

Just as World View II thinking aims to manipulate behavior, World View III will continue to manipulate the environment. Adaptive theories will attempt to identify ways in which individuals and organizations can have a positive impact on society and the world at large. The predominance of communication technology is inescapable in this regard, and I am sure we all expect electronic communication to continue to increase in quantity and complexity into the indefinite future. Theories related to the development, effects, and functions of such devices will continue to be created by scholars in the future.

Electronic advances will affect communication theory in two ways, I predict. First, they will provide increasingly sophisticated tools for data analysis and interpretation. The availability of such tools is bound to affect research and theory. Second, new electronic devices and systems will create new communication possibilities for future generations. A whole gamut of unthought-of functions, uses, and effects will emerge to keep future communication Ph.D.s busy throughout their careers.

It may seem that the rise of communication technology will cause society to become increasingly mass-communication oriented, which is exactly the fear of the critics of mass society. However, I believe that interpersonal communication will not only remain important, but will interface with technology with increasing frequency. This effect can already be seen in the uses of such "personal" electronic media devices as micro-computers, video games, and VTR. As more of these types of devices find their way into homes, families will experience new forms and themes of communication with one another. Theories of the future will take into account not only the effects and uses of mediated communication, but functions, modes, and effects of the concomitant social interaction as well.

Although world view III is permeated by concern for technology, it is not consumed by such matters. I believe that non-technological, or personal, forms of communication will also continue to be investigated in the future. From an adaptive point of view, investigation and theory building will relate primarily to communication competence. Here the goal will be to understand what factors and forms lead to more adaptive or functional transactions and how these factors and forms are learned, developed, and used. These insights will find their way into the classroom, both in schools and in the community, to help individuals learn skills and strategies for effective communication. The back-to-basics movement in schools and colleges already embodies this thrust.

Where, then, does all of this leave the creative world view? Although World View IV will not be as prevalent as World View III in the future, it will remain with us in important forms. I think we will see an interface between these modes of thought. Communication technology, created out of the spirit of World View III will be taken up as a tool by individuals in the creative tradition. New ways of perceiving become available through technology. Such tools as computer animation, for example, will add to the repertoire of the perspectivist. Certain media allow us to see the world in new ways, expanding

the vision of the creative thinker. In return, the shifting perspective of World View IV theorists may provide insights that can be used by adaptive theorists in their search for more effective alternatives.

The critical nature of much World View IV work will remain important in the future. As communication changes, the need for personal critical response will become even more important than it is today. The increased call for more and better training in crticial thinking in colleges and universities may be evidence of the recognition that World View IV thinking needs to keep pace with its adaptive cousin.

For me, World View IV, with its reliance on redefinition, subjective perception, and perspective-taking is the essence of liberal education. Of all the world views discussed here, this has the greatest promise for flexibility of thought and increasing life options, for it engenders a desire to remove conceptual and perceptual blinders and rid of narrow mindedness. With the increasing specialization and pragmatism that the adaptive mode is bound to bring in the future, communication researchers, theorists, and educators must not lose touch with the liberal character of the fourth tradition.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

In this paper I tried merely to express some ideas and speculations. The paper is not a highly academic or scholarly treatment will full documentation. However, there is no paucity of written material related to the ideas expressed here. In this section I wish to mention some works that may be of interest in regard to the thoughts presented here. The following paragraphs divide this work by category for purposes of organization, but I do not intend to imply that the articles and books mentioned below support or conform to my categories completely.

There are several general sources of interest. A classic, of course, is Alfred North Whitehead's Modes of Thought (New York: MacMillan, 1938). A rather dense, but highly relevant and excellent study is presented by Stephen Pepper in his World Hypotheses (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1942). For general discussions of ways of thinking in regard to communication, see B. Aubrey Fisher, Perspectives on Human Communication (New York: MacMillan, 1978). Several excellent discussions of communication theory are also available; I suggest especially Frank E. X. Dance's Human Communication Theory: Comparative Approaches (New York: Harper and Row, 1982) and Stephen Littlejohn's Theories of Human Communication (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1983--forthcoming). For a simpler and more applied approach,

see David Jabusch and Stephen Littlejohn's Elements of Speech Communication (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981).

There is certainly no lack of writing about human nature. For a simple and straightforward treatment, I recommend Floyd Matson's The Idea of Man (New York: Delacorte, 1976). Abraham Maslow has also written extensively about ways of thinking about human behavior. For a compilation of his major ideas, see The Farther Reaches of Human Nature (New York: Viking, 1971). Likewise, there are many writings on knowledge. John Dewey and Arthur Bentley's Knowing and the Known (Boston: Beacon Press, 1949) is a classic, as is Bertrand Russell's Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1948). For a more recent treatment, I especially recommend Marjorie Grene's The Knower and the Known (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).

It is hard to find a source that provides a general orientation to World View I thinking. The best way to become familiar with aspects of this mode is to sample various applications in a piecemeal fashion. A classic Christian treatment is Thomas Merton's The Ascent of Truth (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1951). For a different approach which expresses American Indian values, see Carlos Casteneda's The Teachings of Don Juan: A Jaqui Way of Knowledge (New York: Pocket Books, 1968).

Probably the best single source reflecting World View II assumptions is B. F. Skinner's Beyond Dignity and Freedom (New York: Bantam, 1971). An excellent discussion of classical scientific theory can be found in Carl Hempel's "Theories and Theoretical Explanation," in The Philosophy of Natural Science (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966, pp. 70-84). As an example of the kind of research in communication that conformed to World View II assumptions, see Carl Hovland, Irving Janis, and Harold Kelly's Communication and Persuasion (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953).

I shall only mention only a few of many possible sources that provide insights related to World View III thinking. An excellent general source is Elliot Aronson's The Social Animal (New York: Viking, 1972). A good general overview of mass communication thinking is Melvin DeFleur and Sandra Ball-Rokeach's Theories of Mass Communication (New York: Longman, 1982). For a brief introduction to information technology, see the symposium entitled "The Information Society," in Journal of Communication (vol. 31, 1981, pp. 131-194).

Three books stand out as especially relevant to World View IV. These are Michael Polanyi's Personal Knowledge (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's The Social Construction of Reality (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966), and Alfred Schutz's The Phenomenology of the Social World (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1967). For a World View IV approach to personality, see George Kelly's A Theory of Personality (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963). An explanation of communication that takes a basically World View IV approach is David L. Swanson and Jesse G. Elia in The Nature of Human Communication (Chicago: Science Research Associates, 1976).